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CIA develops a secret taste for art

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You're buying the CIA some artwork for its new building in Langley.

But unless you work there, you'll never get to see it.

The CIA is commissioning the art, but the agency isn't saying how much the work will cost. That's a secret.

And most of the artists don't even know they are being considered.

They'll be told on a need-to-know basis.

What the CIA wants in the lobby of the new building is not a secret, though.

"This art should reflect life in all its positive aspects — e.g., truth, justice, courage, liberty, etc. It should engender feelings of well being, hope, promise and such. It should not produce or reflect negative attitudes, political expressions or feelings of futility.

"The art should respect sensitivities against sexual, sexist, race, ethnic, or other related slurs . . . It should be forceful in style and manner; and be breathtaking in beauty," according to the agency's request.

A panel of judges from the National Endowment for the Arts has selected five finalists. Terence Golden, head of the General Services Administration, is expected to pick the top three later this month.

The artwork is expected to include two sculptures and one "two-dimensional work," which a GSA official describes as a combination of banners, signs and symbols.

Marilyn Farley, who heads the project for GSA, said it is not unusual to have publicly funded art displayed where the public will never see it.

"Most of the buildings here in Washington now have security. So this is no different for us than the Social Security Administration or the Department of Labor. Unless you have business in a government building, you wouldn't see it," she said.

Sharon Foster, a CIA spokeswoman, said the public isn't allowed on the agency's 219-acre compound because "we have people here undercover and because of terrorist threats. We just can't do tours or that sort of thing."

The artists will get a rare visit, though.

They will see the lobby — the CIA refers to this as the "public area" — of the new building and then make sketches of their proposed work. The sketches must be approved by the GSA before the artwork is created, according to Farley.

Although the CIA has a collection of some borrowed artwork, the latest project marks the first time public money has been used for CIA art other than for portraits of CIA directors.

"It's a large complex out there and they have a highly educated group of people. They are highly traveled group and have a sensibility about these things," Farley said.

The five artists were selected from 275 applicants. About 175 of them came from the GSA's pool of artists for federal projects, while 100 applied specifically for the CIA project.

Four of the five finalists were chosen from the GSA pool and probably do not know they are being considered for the CIA project, Farley said, so it's possible they might turn down the opportunity for political reasons. Some may be too busy on other projects.

